

ALTERFACTUAL HISTORY AND THE 1984-5 MINERS' STRIKE

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INTRODUCTION

In the early 1970s Britain was swept by a wave of militant industrial struggle, the depth and political character of which was unprecedented since the 1920s, both in terms of the sheer scale of strike activity involved and because it witnessed some of the most dramatic confrontations between unions and government in postwar Britain. One of the most notable high points of struggle was the 1972 miners' strike for higher wages, which delivered the miners their 'greatest victory' (Hall, 1981) and inflicted a devastating defeat on the Conservative government headed by Edward Heath. The strike, with its mass pickets, provided a vivid illustration of the power and confidence of shopfloor union organization that had been built up in the post-war period (Darlington and Lyddon, 2001; Lyddon and Darlington, 2003). Although the miners won another victory in 1974, culminating in a general election that brought down the Heath government, this strike was altogether a much more passive dispute compared with 1972, with a tight control on picketing under TUC-supported guidelines of only six pickets imposed by the NUM executive.

A much more marked contrast occurred with the 1984-5 miners' strike, which took place against the backcloth of a deep economic recession, an avalanche of redundancies and closures, and a neo-liberal Conservative government headed by Margaret Thatcher that displayed its resolve to fight with and beat any trade-union (the 'enemy within') that sought to challenge its authority. During '84-5, in what was to be the longest national dispute in post-war Britain, the government inflicted a bitter defeat on the miners (albeit not as great as in the 1926 General Strike) in a battle over pit closures and redundancies. The outcome of the strike both symbolized the rapidly changing shift in the balance of power away from workers towards employers and greatly accelerated this process across the trade-union movement as a whole in the years that followed.

This article aims to reassess the defeat of the miners' strike of '84-5 by comparing it with the victory of '72. In the process it aims to critically evaluate the predominant argument accepted by most commentators, both hostile and sympathetic to the miners' struggles, that the 1984-5 strike was a heroic but inevitably doomed stand against the juggernaut of a Thatcher government determined to use unlimited resources to avenge its defeats of a decade or more earlier, in which the miners' militant tactics merely contributed to the scale of their defeat (Goodman, 1985; Wilsher *et al*, 1985; Adeney and Lloyd, 1986; Routledge, 1993).

For example, Robert Taylor in *The Trade Union Question in British Politics* (1993: 292:298) argues Scargill was an 'industrial Napoleon' who called a strike 'at the wrong time' on the 'wrong issue' and adopted strategy and tactics that were 'impossibilist', with 'an inflexible list of extravagant non-negotiable demands' that amounted to 'reckless adventurism' which was 'a dangerous, self-defeating delusion'. A similar historical assessment, albeit sometimes less

vitriolic, has been made by many others, with Goodman (1985: 48) expressing the widely shared perception that central to the failure of the strike was the crucial tactical error of substituting the flying picket for the holding of a national ballot. It was this 'error of judgement' that alienated the majority of Nottinghamshire miners, weakened the NUM's position with the rest of the trade-union movement, undermined the miners' cause with public opinion, and inevitably opened the door to picket-line violence which in turn strengthened the hand of the Coal Board, government and media. Ironically, as George Bolton, vice-president of the Scottish NUM and chairman of the Communist Party, commented, reflecting the party's subsequent public rejection of 'Scargillism': 'you can't picket your way to victory' (*Marxism Today*, September 1984). Such a strategy, others have argued, meant a brave and heroic resistance movement was arrogantly and recklessly led to 'loss without limit' (Adeney and Lloyd, 1986).

This article presents an alternative explanation for the 84-5 defeat. It argues that it was actually the *failure* to replicate to the same extent the militant tactics of mass and flying pickets to stop the movement of coal that had been so dramatically adopted during the 1972 strike, combined with the relative lack of solidarity industrial action from other trade-unionists compared with the earlier dispute, which was crucial.

THE 1972 STRIKE

Some of the key features of the audacity and militancy of the '72 miners strike that explain its success were (1) effective picketing; (2) extent of solidarity action; and 3) strength of rank-and-file organization and left-wing networks.

(1) effective picketing

Whilst traditions of secondary picketing in Yorkshire had been extended to some other mining areas in the 1969 and 1970 unofficial strikes, the '72 strike saw it raised to an altogether different plane. In practice, the mass and/or flying picket became the key tactical weapon that was to prove devastatingly effective and often in defiance of the national union leadership (Darlington and Lyddon, 2001: 38-50). Despite official NUM instructions to their members to maintain safety work and allow pit deputies (members of the union NACODS) to do likewise, there was remarkable widespread unofficial action in many different areas of the country to deprive pits of NUM safety cover, combined with the use of mass pickets several hundred strong, to prevent the deputies carrying out their work. Similarly, union instructions to permit the union's white collar section (COSA) to continue working normally were defied with successful unofficial mass picketing across the country, which was then extended to National Coal Board (NCB) employees in the Clerical and Administrative Workers Union who did not join the

strike at the large Coal House offices in Doncaster (and in south-Wales and the north-east).

Even more significantly, from the onset of the strike miners in many areas started picketing other sites away from their collieries, with the union's national office only issuing official instructions along these lines a few days into the dispute. Firstly, there was a move to stop the general movement of coal by dock, rail, and road transport workers, and its use by power workers - with different NUM areas allocated responsibility for picketing coal stock yards, open cast mines, docks and power stations in different non-mining regions of the country. For example, the Barnsley Panel of the Yorkshire miners was given East Anglia to picket. When the tactic of spreading pickets thinly over too many locations (15 ports and 7 power stations) failed, Arthur Scargill (1975) successfully pushed for mass picketing to be organized at each site in turn. Secondly, there was picketing to stop the movement of other essential materials – namely oil into oil-fired power stations and the materials needed to make serviceable and ignite the coal in power stations (such as caustic soda, hydrogen, sulphuric acid, lubricating oil, and other chemicals). A dramatic example of this type of mass picketing occurred at the Coalite Smokeless Fuel plant in Grimethorpe, near Barnsley (Crick, 1985: 53-54).

In all of the above cases picketing was carried out despite repeated violent confrontations with the police, often involving arrests - notably at the mass picket and blockade of Longannet power station in Scotland (Wallington, 1972), and was characterized by its mass participation - with Vic Allen (1981: 200) estimating an average of 40,000 pickets each day. Whilst this is probably an overestimate, there is no doubt such activity involved a very high proportion of the 308,000 strikers and probably dwarfed that of any other large strike. Crucially, 'the spirit of aggression and zeal displayed by rank-and-file miners' (Taylor, 1980: 367), exemplified by the use of flying and mass pickets, was so successful that it eventually led the government to declare a state of emergency in order to ration electricity supplies, leading to power cuts and the lay-off of 1.6 million workers. Margaret Thatcher's subsequent reflections (1995: 216) confirm the shock the strike was to give the Conservative government, forcing it to capitulate shortly afterwards: 'The possibility of effective mass picketing which could prevent oil and coal getting to power stations, was simply not on the agenda'.

(2) extent of solidarity action

A second feature of the '72 miners' strike was the extent of practical solidarity action displayed (both official and unofficial) of other workers, action which the miners' pickets themselves directly encouraged but without which their strike could never have been so effective.

Such solidarity was expressed in numerous ways, most notably in the observance of TUC General Council guidelines issued on the second day of the strike asking trade-unionists to respect NUM picket lines, albeit this only applied to the movement of coal (TUC *Annual Report*, 1972: 97-8). Rank-and-file transport and railway union members quickly respected picket lines (which often had to be maintained 24 hours a day) and sometimes went much further than official union guidelines. Dockers boycotted ships carrying imported coal for power stations, and train drivers boycotted all movement of coal by rail, with ASLEF responding to local initiatives by calling on members not to take oil into power stations where there were picket lines. However, the national decisions of the railway and transport workers' unions to respect the miners' picket lines did not mean that all movement of coal magically halted. For example, road haulage drivers - who might be threatened with disciplinary action or even dismissal by their employers - often required robust picketing and face-to-face argument to be persuaded (although non-union drivers, often with police escorts, remained a continuing problem). One of the most remarkable examples of solidarity was when an NUM banner draped across an overhead railway bridge by two flying pickets caused the drivers of a goods train of oil tankers to stop in their tracks and refuse to cross (*Times*, 2 August 1972).

The most affected organization was the Central Electricity Generating Board (CEGB) which reported that it was 'in a state of siege', complained of the 'unrelenting blockade' of power stations, and considered itself to be 'conducting a guerilla war'. The pickets' stranglehold on the supply of oil and essential gases to power stations was critical and accelerated the impact of the immobilization of coal supplies (*The Times*, 2, 5, 15 February 1972).

The solidarity displayed at Saltley, and the willingness and ability of other trade-unionists across the country - such as dockers, power workers, lorry drivers, and railway workers - to take action in support of the miners generally, clearly reflected the self-confidence and strength of shop stewards' organization that had been built up in the proceeding years, and was a reflection of the high level of working class struggle, the offensive nature of many strikes, and the way in which the initiative was increasingly coming from the shopfloor level rather than national union leaderships during this period.

(3) strength of rank-and-file organization and left-wing networks

Also important was the strength of rank-and-file organization and left-wing networks amongst the miners. Established in the late 1960s the Barnsley Miners Forum (whose most prominent figure was Scargill) had grouped militant activists in Yorkshire together and already successfully contested the activities of the right-wing official union leadership at local and national level, both through the union structure and by taking the lead in the use of flying pickets during the unofficial '69 and '70 strikes. A National Miners' Forum drew together left-wing

activists and full-time officials from Yorkshire, Scotland, Kent and Derbyshire (Allen, 1981; Taylor, 1984; Crick, 1985; Routledge, 1993). Even though, like other broad left organizations of the time, they were concerned with electioneering against right-wing area and national NUM leaders (successfully securing the election of ex-Communist Party member Lawrence Daly as NUM general secretary), they were also ideally placed to provide a militant focus for rank-and-file bitterness over wages.

As a result, although the president of the NUM (Joe Gormley) during the '72 strike was a right-winger, and the NUM executive had a narrow right-majority, it was to be the confidence and organization of the rank-and-file, who often went well beyond official union guidelines, that set the pace and direction of the strike. Sometimes national and area NUM full-time officials were pulled along by rank-and-file initiatives. On other occasions the national, and often the area, union officials were clearly against the decisions taken by miners but were unable to enforce their policy or to use sanctions against the members.

It is also of major significance that whilst the miners received support from the official trade-union movement, they were never subservient to the TUC general council and were able to dictate their own fate. The NUM was able to escalate the strike outside the normal constraints of Congress House, unlike in 1926. The miners' 'understanding of their own history...resulted in the TUC being excluded from all negotiations' (Francis and Smith, 1980: 476).

In addition, a very important role was played by a network of left-wing political activists, in particular those grouped around the Communist Party, but including other left-wing Labour Party and non-aligned militants. This was evident inside the NUM - within the miners' forums and on the NUM national executive (notably through the figure of Scottish NUM president Mick McGahey) – with several years of campaigning by the left within all levels of the union successfully building the necessary strike majority in the first place. It was also evident in terms of the solidarity the miners received from other trade-unionists, notably the supply of information, contacts, financial support, and the extent of blacking and strike action. For example, at Saltley, two Communist Party members, Frank Watters (Birmingham district party secretary) and Arthur Harper (chair of the AUEW East Birmingham district committee and convener at the BL Tractors and Transmissions Plant) were instrumental in winning support for strike action, as were the 800 other party members in the city many of whom were leading convenors and stewards in local factories (Watters, 1992; Darlington and Lyddon, 2001).

THE 1984-5 STRIKE

The 1984-5 miners' strike was completely different from 1972 in many respects. Of course, there were some similar features – such as the rank-and-file initiative,

mass and flying pickets, defiance of the law, violent confrontations with police, solidarity from other trade-unionists, and the way the Labour Party (at least its organization and leadership in general as opposed to the activities of many individual members) was fairly irrelevant, and whilst formally sympathetic retained deep reservations about the tactics used.

But there were also important differences compared to '72. Clearly, as we shall see below, the miners faced a quite different type of political opponent in '84 that had a critical vested interest in breaking them, combined with a formidable array of weapons with which to do so. Similarly, the economic context was quite different, with the fear of unemployment generally during the early 1980s contrasting with the relatively much more favourable environment of the early 1970s, as further reflected in the different level and character of workers' struggle within the two periods. In addition, the unity achieved by the miners in '72 (and '74) proved difficult to preserve in '84-5. The national wages parity (introduced by the 1966 National Power Loading Agreement), which had underpinned strike action in the early 1970s, was effectively destroyed in 1978 by the reintroduction of incentive payments into the industry. Meanwhile, the uneven impact of the pit closure programme adopted by the Coal Board after the election of the Thatcher government in 1979, made it an inherently divisive issue on which to build a united front across the various coalfields. Nonetheless, it should be noted despite such problems, 80 per cent of miners nationally (although only a small minority in Nottingham) were on strike by April 1984, including many of those in no immediate danger of job loss, reflecting the degree of unity that was achieved.

Also different from '72 was the way the NUM national leadership rather than proceeding to national strike action under a ballot as provided for in the union constitution's rule 43, responded to the strikes already underway in Yorkshire and Scotland (not all of which were directly related to the issue of pit closures) and the activities of picketing miners, to endorse and to extend approval to any other coalfield joining the strike under rule 41. This spread the strike on a 'rolling' basis in what union vice-president McGahey termed a 'domino effect' (Adeney and Lloyd, 1986: 169).

But clearly the main difference with '72 is that the miners suffered a major *defeat* in '84-5. The key question is whether, as many commentators have claimed, against the backcloth of a trailblazing neo-liberal Thatcher government, defeat was inevitable, and the NUM's militant tactics adopted during the strike were self-defeating?

Arguably, some of the central features of the 84-5 strike that explain its defeat were the (1) scale of government and state offensive; (2) inadequate picketing; (3) weakness of rank-and-file organization and left-wing networks; (4) and limited solidarity action. By exploring each of these components, and taking into consideration some other broader features, it is possible to make some

comparisons with '72, in the process considering potential alternative courses of action.

(1) scale of government and state offensive

To begin with there was the sheer scale of the offensive mounted by the government and the state, not seen since 1926 and on a qualitatively different level to that experienced in '72 (Coulter, Miller and Walker, 1984; Beynon, 1985; Geary, 1985; Reed and Adamson, 1985; Samuel, Bloomfield and Bonas, 1986; Green, 1990; Milne, 2004). Although the 84-5 strike was about pit closures and job losses, it was also a central battle in the Conservative government's attempts to transform society along the path of neo-liberalism and to crush working class resistance. Margaret Thatcher saw the NUM – and Scargill in particular – as the embodiment of all that she held to be endemic in Britain's economic decline: monopoly trade-unionism is a state industry subsidized well beyond the point of efficient market forces. She saw the political need to defeat the NUM – the 'Coldstream Guards of organized labour' if she was to cow the trade-union movement in general (Goodman, 1985: 17). And, no doubt, Thatcher was motivated by a need for revenge for the setbacks of the early 1970s.

In accordance with the Ridley Report (*Economist*, 27 May 1978), the government had in a preemptive move arranged for the building up of coal stocks at power stations, made preparations to import foreign coal, recruited non-union lorry drivers to convoy coal to the power stations, and switched from coal to oil firing to save coal stocks. The government also appointed Ian MacGregor as chairman of the Coal Board to spearhead the new management offensive. And with the onset of the strike it was prepared to use unlimited resources and the full wrath of the state against the miners.

Despite systematic denials of government intervention in public-sector negotiations, the Thatcher government directed contingency operations throughout, effectively shaping the activities of the NCB, CEGB, and British Rail. And following the creation of a National Reporting Centre to centralize Britain's regional police forces at a national level (Bunyan, 1985), the government mobilized the police in a highly coordinated military-style offensive against the miners, designed to isolate the Nottinghamshire area and break picket lines elsewhere, for example using mounted police with truncheons to charge down pickets at Orgreave. They occupied mining villages, arrested 11,312 people and tried 5,653 in the courts for alleged offences (most of them miners), casting aside notions of civil liberties (Percy-Smith and Hillyard, 1985: 345). David Hart, a wealthy property developer with close connections with Thatcher's team of advisers at 10 Downing Street, played a significant role in helping to organize a National Working Miners' Committee. At the same time new laws imposing punitive deductions from benefits rights for strikers' families were implemented. The courts were also a weapon in the war against the miners, with injunctions

banning them from picket lines and judges declaring the strike illegal, ordering the seizure of union funds, and in the end trying to take over the whole miners' union. Finally, the NUM was subject to a intensive ideological offensive by the media, notably in a campaign for a national ballot aimed at breaking the momentum of the dispute.

However, arguably this formidable barrage from the government, state and media did not *itself* break the resolve of the miners or their supporters. Whilst it certainly made the task of effective picketing (both within and outside the coalfields) considerably more difficult it was not entirely responsible for the relative weaknesses of the strike's impact and the lack of solidarity action displayed by other trade-unionists compared with '72. There were also other factors we need to take into account.

(2) inadequate picketing

The 1984-5 miners' strike was characterized by widespread picketing aimed at making the strike bite, and involved much more violent confrontations with the police than in '72. But of crucial significance to the defeat of the strike was the fact that the successful tactics adopted twelve years earlier - namely the concentration of flying and/or mass pickets at power stations, docks and coal depots until the movement of coal and other materials was blocked at each site - were not replicated to the same extent. Instead, such picket lines where they were established (and there were far fewer than expected) were generally sporadic, desultory and often ignored (Adeney and Lloyd, 1986:108-111; Winterton and Winterton, 1989: 96-99; Richards, 1996:127-127).

As we have already noted, the relative ineffectiveness of the picketing in '84-5 is to be explained partly by the deliberately obstructionist intervention of the police. In addition, although rank-and-file miners attempted to take the initiative by spreading the strike in an offensive fashion to win support from other workers, for example at Didcot power station in Oxfordshire, much of the picketing was necessarily forced onto the defensive back into the coalfields in order to attempt to halt the back-to-work moves in Nottingham and elsewhere. But probably the most important reason why the miners' successful picketing tactics of '72 were not replicated was because of the lack of central direction or co-ordination to activists on the ground provided by area NUM officials (Callinicos and Simons, 1985). Four examples illustrate the point:

- *Nottingham*: there was the denunciation of the Yorkshire flying pickets that converged on Nottingham in the first days of the strike by Notts area NUM officials, the refusal of left-wing Notts area secretary Henry Richardson to publicly dispute miners' 'right to work' (despite appeals not to cross picket lines), and the public disavowal of the unofficial pickets and instruction for them to be withdrawn for two weeks made by Yorkshire area NUM officials so to allow a Notts area ballot to take place. It is possible that if, from the onset

of the strike and before the huge subsequent police operation that was mounted, striking miners had been provided the opportunity to explain their case face-to-face to working miners with the aim of trying to bring the pits out, the division that developed between Nottingham and the rest of the coalfields would not have been so fatal. Certainly, this tactic operated successfully in South Wales where the sanctity of the picket line proved crucial in overcoming the result of individual pithead ballots that had initially recorded opposition to strike action at eighteen of the area's twenty-eight NUM lodges (Richards, 1996: 100).

Ironically, notwithstanding the assumption that the NUM's failure to organize a national ballot was a 'tactical mistake' that inevitably undermined miners' unity, and that a vote could actually have been won (a viewpoint held even by left-wing commentators such as Beynon, 1985: 7), it seems likely that *had* a ballot been implemented it would merely have invited a 'no' vote and derailed the entire momentum of the strike movement. A number of crucial arguments influenced the decision *against* holding one, including: the failure to obtain a majority for action in earlier ballots in 1982 and 1983; the considerable initial success which pickets had in spreading the strike suggesting their objectives could be achieved without recourse to a ballot; the supporters of a ballot were generally opposed to the strike and knew the media would mount an unprecedented 'vote no' campaign, which meant there was no guarantee that Notts miners would have joined a strike that the area voted against, even if a national ballot had been held and a majority attained overall; pit closures were a divisive issue with no person having the right to vote another out of a job (Winterton and Winterton, 1989: 70-71). Although a *ballot* is unlikely to have secured a favourable majority in Nottinghamshire, it does seem reasonable to suggest that an active *picketing* strategy backed up with a propaganda offensive from the outset of the strike might have won a much larger network of support in the area, thereby considerably diminishing the damage to the strike that transpired.

- *Power Stations*: there was the discarding of power stations (the Coal Board's single biggest customer) as an unrealistic target by many area NUM officials 'despite anguished criticism from many rank-and-file strikers' (*Sunday Times* Insight Team, 1985: 84). In '72 success had been based on denying coal to power stations. With no fresh coal being mined, it had been relatively easy to ask power workers not to accept it. This time, with substantial supplies of coal being delivered from working pits, there was all the more reason to contact power workers. In Yorkshire there was no effort made to move coal into power stations, but there would have been a case for attempting to stop some of the other chemical supplies necessary for operations. This had been a crucial factor in '72, since when the electricity board had built up much larger supplies and storage facilities, but they were not shortage-proof, as initial picketing by South Wales miners at the Didcot power station (albeit not

sustained) demonstrated. Equally, picketing could have impacted to hamper or even halt operations at oil-fired power stations, as briefly occurred at West Thurrock in Sussex (Adeney and Lloyd, 1986: 147-153).

- *Steel*: there was the granting of local 'dispensations' by NUM area officials in Scotland, Yorkshire and South Wales to the ISTC steel union aimed at allowing sufficient supplies of coal through to keep the furnaces alight and to avert the threat of any steel plant closure by the British Steel Corporation (BSC). This decision subsequently enabled BSC (the Coal Board's second biggest customer) to utilize coal supplies, which it had claimed to be only for maintenance, to substantially restore full production levels. Again, it is possible that had a determined appeal been made to rank-and-file steel workers from the outset to defy such threats and support the miners, combined with the mobilization of mass pickets by miners aimed at halting the delivery of coal into the steel plants, the impact of the strike might have been much greater, particularly if the car and engineering sectors had, as a result, been starved of their essential supplies. Despite the hostile stance of ISTC union leader Bill Sirs there was widespread sympathy for the miners, reinforced by the support they had received from the NUM in their own recent national strike that could have been tapped. In the event, an attempt by the NUM's national leadership to order a halt to supplies to the steel plants, following mounting grassroots criticism of the local 'sweetheart deals', led to belated and poorly coordinated area union attempts to mount token blockades. But such moves, after BSC increasingly turned to road transport to get the (increased rate of) ore in and steel out, for example at Ravenscraig in Scotland and Llanwern in South Wales, proved fruitless.
- *Orgreave*: there was the refusal of NUM area officials (above all Jack Taylor, Yorkshire NUM president) and the union's national executive to mount mass picketing aimed at turning 'Orgreave into Saltley', notwithstanding NUM president Arthur Scargill's determined personal efforts to encourage such a repeat of the '72 victory. Although thousands of rank-and-file miners *did* take the initiative from below to converge onto the coking plant (which supplied the Scunthorpe steel plant), area union officials refused to call mass pickets for more than two consecutive days and rejected the attempt to build a consistent and prolonged mobilization of mass pickets, or to appeal for solidarity strike action or picket line support from the large concentrations of engineering and steelworkers based in nearby Sheffield and Rotherham, as was advocated by at least a small core of militant activists in the Yorkshire area (Winterton and Winterton, 1989: 100). Again, it is possible that the adoption of such alternative tactics might have galvanized sufficient numbers (of hitherto more passive strikers as well as sympathetic local trade-unionists) to overcome the determination of the state to defeat mass picketing to successfully shut the plant down, which could have marked a symbolic political and psychological (albeit not necessarily industrial) turning point in the strike in a similar fashion

to Saltley. This in turn could have boosted the impetus to spread picketing out to other vulnerable areas. Instead, the uneven series of mass pickets that were held were unable to prevent the thousands of police officers equipped with riot helmets, shields, truncheons and horses at their flanks, inflicting some of the greatest violence seen in an industrial dispute since before the First World War.

In all of these four examples an explicit tactical decision to act in a certain way, and not adopt the alternative approach favoured by the most militant sections of miners, was made by area NUM leaders. In the process each example illustrates the way the tactics adopted during the 84-5 strike *were* indeed self-defeating to some extent - but for entirely *opposite* reasons than those most commentators who have criticized 'Scargillite' militant trade-unionism have argued. As Scargill himself commented after NUM area officials had signalled an end to picketing at Orgreave: 'Some people say that the problem was a failure of mass picketing, but I say it was a failure to mass picket' (Simons, 2004: 30).

However, an explanation for why such inaction occurred, and an estimate of the realistic chances of alternative tactics being successfully implemented, has also to take into account some other notable weaknesses of the strike compared with its predecessor in '72.

(3) weakness of rank-and-file organization and left-wing networks

A fundamental characteristic of the '84-5 strike that distinguished it from '72 was the very high degree of control exercised by the full-time officials of the various NUM areas and national executive. This followed a process of bureaucratization within pit and area level union structures which had taken place during the 1970s and early '80s. In the 1960s and early '70s there had been a counter-pressure to this trend in the important Yorkshire area in the form of a network of experienced left-wing activists (in the Barnsley Forum) who had the base of support in their own pits to encourage rank-and-file action even though the union leadership condemned it in the '69 and '70 disputes. The rank-and-file's subsequent success in taking control of the '72 strike and leading it to victory enabled the militants to go even further, capturing a number of full-time posts at the pit or area level and effectively winning control of the official union machine in Yorkshire.. Other left areas such as Scotland and South Wales saw similar developments, culminating in Scargill's subsequent elevation to leadership of the NUM in 1981 and the election of a solid left majority on the union's national executive by 1984.

Yet in many respects this left then proceeded to allow the network of grass roots activists that had emerged to dissolve into the bureaucratic union machine that existed at both pit and area level, with the Barnsley Forum ceasing to exist

and the Miners' Forum essentially becoming a body for full-time union officials. What increasingly seemed to matter was attempting to keep on good terms with the area leaderships, even when this sometimes meant dampening down pit-level struggles that flared up spontaneously (Harman, 1985).

During the '84-5 strike, whilst the left leaders of the main areas clearly wanted to mount a display of strength sufficient to force the government and the Coal Board back to the negotiating table, they were equally firmly opposed to replicating the tactics of the '72 strike. And unlike '72, the Communist Party - by now generally more concerned to operate through the influence of official union channels than to encourage rank-and-file initiative - effectively acted as a force of constraint throughout the strike. The CP was also wracked by its political schism between old-style, 'hard-line Stalinists' and a new 'Euro-Communist' wing, with high-level NUM figures such as Mick McGahey and George Bolton having ideological as well as tactical differences with Scargill (Eaden and Renton, 2002). A national left-wing and organized rank-and-file network within the union was now noticeable by its *absence*, either to exert pressure on those who had won full-time posts or to provide some direction for the enthusiasm of young militant miners thrown into activity by the strike. Although in the Yorkshire area a rank-and-file network grew out of the immediate needs of activists seeking to hold the strike together at a local level (which included supporters of left-wing groups such as the Socialist Workers Party), and gained some support from the Barnsley and South Yorkshire panels, it was too small to have any real impact (Winterton and Winterton, 1989: 240-241).

Moreover, despite Scargill's leadership as one of the most militant and left-wing figures in British trade-union history there were limits to what he could achieve. This was to a large extent imposed by the reliance on operating through the union's official machine and its area leaders (albeit often 'left' officials) rather than independent rank-and-file organization and activity from below. This meant that although union officials in key areas blocked Scargill's picketing tactics (for example, at Nottingham, the power and steel plants, and at Orgreave) he made no attempt to break with them publicly or (apart from briefly over Orgreave) to appeal over their heads to encourage the most active strikers to adopt the militant tactics needed to win (Callinicos and Simons, 1985: 242-247).

In other words, the miners won in '72 with a *right*-wing union president (and a small right-majority on the national executive) because at the pit level there were activists linked together who could coordinate action even if some of those at the top of the union wanted to hold it back. By contrast, the miners lost in '84-5, despite incomparably more militant national leadership from the union's *left*-wing president (and with a left-wing executive), because those independent rank-and-file and left-wing networks had withered away. Nonetheless, if NUM area officials *had* acted differently and attempted to call for more effective mass and flying picketing along the lines indicated, this in turn might have given those individual militants and branch officials who were keen to escalate the action to

make the strike more effective the confidence to organize and co-ordinate their activities, and pull much wider forces into such activity.

Yet whatever the tactical and organizational difficulties *internally* within the NUM, these were further compounded and accentuated by *external* factors of an even greater magnitude.

(4) limited solidarity action

Undoubtedly the most important explanation for the defeat of the 84-5 strike was the limited solidarity - in terms of *industrial action* – the miners received from other trade-unionists compared with '72. The success of the miners in '72 (and in '74) had been largely due to the fact that the movement of coal had been 'blackened' *en masse*, with the result that the lights went out fairly rapidly over Britain. But whilst there was considerable practical relief support across the country in '84-5 - evidenced by the network of support groups, the 'twinning' of trade-union branches with individual pits, street-based financial collections, food donations and benefit socials - such solidarity could only sustain the miners for the year-long strike, whereas victory required physical industrial support in the form of boycotts and solidarity strikes. Yet this was not generally forthcoming. , (including the refusal by railway workers across the country to handle coal trains despite being threatened with the sack in a number of places,

There *were* some notable exceptions. The NUR and ASLEF instructed its members to boycott the movement of all coal and coking coal, with the result that across the country railway workers refused to handle coal trains, despite being threatened with the sack in a number of places (notably in Coalville, Leicestershire, and in the north-west). Dockers and seafarers also blocked imports of coal in some places, and Fleet Street *Sun* printers twice refused to print copies of the paper in protest at hostile editorial policy covering the miners dispute. However, there was the failure of several key unions to deliver effective industrial support.

Arguably, the reason for the level of solidarity falling well below what was needed to win was primarily because of the role of the TUC general council and official union leadership (which included the left-led transport workers' union as well as the right-wing led steel and power workers' unions), but was also because of the lack of confidence and strong independent rank-and-organization on the ground inside the British trade-union movement generally during this period. Three examples illustrate the first problem:

- *Docks*: there was the refusal of the TGWU leadership to use the two national docks strikes to prevent BSC's attempt to import coal through crucial non-scheme ports at Dover through mass picketing and to call for the extension of the National Dock Labour Scheme to all ports (to cover the 19,000 dockers employed in ports outside the Scheme that were on strike). Crucially, if this

had been done, it would have opened up a second front alongside the miners. The first docks' strike in July 1984 in particular, potentially transformed the miners' situation given that (although defeated at Orgreave) with other trade-unionists joining them out on strike they could still have won. Certainly, the sense of panic that had been such a feature of the industrial relations crises of the early 1970s was palpable, with the dock strike precipitating a drop in the pound and an increase in interest rates by 2 per cent (*Financial Times*, 16 July 1984). Coal Board chairman Ian MacGregor (1986: 254) acknowledged that the widening out of the strike to the docks 'caused a great deal of anxiety' inside BSC and the government, and demonstrated the 'tightrope we had to walk all the time to keep the miners' strike from becoming a national trade-union issue'. In the event, the hesitation and inaction of the TGWU leadership contributed to the strike's collapse, as what had begun as a show of strength ended in failure.

- *TUC*: there was the refusal throughout the year-long strike of the TUC general council (and Labour Party leadership) to translate their formal public declarations of support for the miners into effective solidarity industrial action on the ground. Thus, instead of attempting to encourage trade-unionists to respect miners' picket lines, to stop 'scab' coal and oil entering the power stations (or even to support regional TUCs who held days of action in support of the miners), they put much of their effort into top-level shuttle-diplomacy aimed at securing a compromise deal and return to work. Not surprisingly relations between the NUM and TUC were strained (with formal assistance only sought after the first six months of the strike), not just because of longstanding suspicion and contempt for the betrayal of 1926, but also because of its perceived retreat in the face of Thatcherism's offensive against trade-unionism. When the TUC general secretary Len Murray condemned violence on the picket lines 'from whatever quarter', and refused to mobilize solidarity industrial action when the NUM's assets were sequestered for contempt of court, it merely confirmed for most strikers its reputation as an ineffective and unreliable source of support. As a striker at Whitwell colliery in Derbyshire commented: 'The TUC was absolute rubbish, a waste of time. It give us nothing...whatsoever' (Richards, 1996: 133).
- *NACODS*: there was the decision by the pit deputies' union (NACODS) leaders to call off its threatened national strike (against the Coal Board's attempt to terminate an agreement which guaranteed their pay if they turned back at NUM picket lines) on the basis of a (unfulfilled) government promise for a new review procedure to cover pit closures. According to Ian MacGregor (1986: 273) a strike could have closed down the working pits in Nottinghamshire and 'brought Scargill near to victory', a prospect that led Thatcher to later acknowledge her fear she was 'in danger of losing everything' from a stoppage that 'could indeed have brought down the government' (Campbell, 2003: 366).

These three examples illustrate that lack of official union backing was probably one of the most fatal blows to the miners' chances for victory. Whilst union leaders clearly did not want the miners to lose, they were equally concerned not to become involved in mobilizing their members in an open political confrontation with the government, which they feared would lead to the threat of legal action, sequestration of unions funds, and the possibility of serious defeat. Meanwhile, newly-elected Labour Party leader Neil Kinnock, viewing the party's close association with the unions as an electoral liability, also gave credence to the government and media portrayal of strikers as mindless thugs keeping the majority of miners out by sheer intimidation, through his repeated condemnation of picket line violence (although he was at the same time unable to distance himself completely from the miners).

But in addition it was much more difficult for miners to gain solidarity action from rank-and-file trade-unionists compared with '72 because the strength of the British shop stewards' movement had been severely undermined and suffered a series of setbacks in the late 1970s and early '80s. The government had successfully defeated national strikes by steelworkers in 1980 and train drivers in 1982, as well as outlawing trade-unions at Cheltenham GCHQ in 1984. It had also introduced employment legislation that reduced immunity from legal prosecution for certain types of strikes, secondary action and picketing (utilized at the Stockport *Messenger* dispute in 1983; Dickenson, 1984). And amidst the general downturn in the level of workers' struggles, rocketing unemployment and shift in the balance of bargaining power to employers, there was an increasing pragmatic defensiveness on the shopfloor. As a result, the minority of activists and militants in the workplaces who might have been prepared to take industrial action in support of the miners often did not have the organization, experience or confidence to confront union officials (or even shop stewards) who failed to organize for real solidarity. The extent of the downturn in struggle was reflected in Sheffield engineering - with no major stoppages in 1981, only one in 1982 (against redundancies) and again only one in 1983 (over redundancies) (*Department of Employment Gazette*, July 1982, July 1983 and July 1984).

The ability and willingness of trade-unionists to take industrial action in support of the miners was also to some degree dependent on the health of workplace union organization, with resilient workplace organization in newspapers and on the docks leading to a much more positive response than within the road haulage industry, with little such organization, or in the steel industry, where it had been severely damaged after the 1980 strike. (Winterton and Winterton, 1989: 117). No doubt, the damaging consequences of the miners' own internal divisions, with most Nottinghamshire miners working, also undermined the strength of the NUM's case amongst some trade-unionists.

In so far as there were any left-wing networks in the unions – which were anyway much weaker in numbers and influence in key sections of industry compared with '72 – their predominant *broad left* electoral orientation towards

winning positions meant they had become so absorbed by their own niches within the lower ranks of the official movement as to fail to carry the arguments down to the shopfloor. As a result, many union road haulage drivers, and steel and power workers, fearing for their own jobs, felt unable to take industrial action to assist striking miners.

Certainly a large minority of trade-unionists in many different strategic industries (including railways, power, steel and transport) supported the strike, and were prepared to show this by donating food and money, and, in some cases, taking industrial action, even if this was usually of a token nature. Precisely because of their lack of confidence in their own ability to deliver more decisive action, they were liable to look to left-led union officials for a lead. As it was, because such leadership was not forthcoming it directly contributed, along with other factors we have considered, to the miners' defeat.

CONCLUSION

In any assessment of workers' defeat it is always difficult to evaluate the relative importance of objective and subjective factors in bringing it about. Undoubtedly the *objective* constraints in 1984-5 - such as the difficult economic environment, nature of the state's offensive and the significant decline in the level of workers' struggle and confidence generally inside the trade-union movement - meant the struggle was much more difficult for the miners than in 1972. But this did not necessarily make defeat inevitable, as many commentators have tended to assume. Also of major significance was the *subjective* factor of human agency and trade-union leadership - notably the militant tactics that were either *not* adopted or were insufficiently enforced, combined with the lack of effective solidarity industrial action.

Of course, the adoption of any *single* one of the alternative tactical initiatives or courses of action that have been outlined above is unlikely to have had enough impact to have significantly altered the outcome of the strike *in itself*, although it might have acted to set off a chain reaction which brought into play other steps that combined together *might have* made a real difference.

Undoubtedly some of the missing tactical steps would have been easier to achieve than others - particularly given that the high level of optimism that 'the world could be changed' characteristic of the '72 strike had been considerably eroded by '84-5. For example, it seems likely an escalation of the mass picketing by the miners aimed at stopping the movement of coal into steel plants would have been less demanding to achieve than solidarity action by steel workers themselves. In the case of the former the miners were fighting for their own jobs, held a strong belief in the justice of their case, and the momentum of the strike had itself generated a relatively high level of confidence that Thatcher could be

defeated, at least amongst the active minority of strikers. By contrast, in the case of the latter the steel workers had just been defeated in their own strike, were less willing to engage in action that might threaten their own jobs, and were much more affected by the general air of fatalism and retreat that characterised sections of the trade-union movement.

However, even if solidarity action by steel workers was more difficult to achieve than an escalation of the mass picketing by miners outside the steel plants, this does not mean that if the latter had been adopted it might not have helped to transform the climate sufficiently to make the former much more realistically achievable, at least in some steel plants.

Whether the eventual outcome of the strike even if a series of alternative tactical initiatives by the miners combined with solidarity action from other workers *had* been taken, given the enormous objective constraints, would have been a miners' *victory* is impossible to know, although it is a legitimate question to pose. Even so, the other side of the coin to take into account, albeit beyond the terms of this particular article, is another consideration: What alternative stratagems might both capital and the state have adopted in counter-response to such more militant tactics and could they have diminished their overall impact?

Much more speculative and hypothetical would be any attempt to answer the following questions: If there *had* been a miners' victory would the Conservative government have been in office for another 12 years, would New Labour have still emerged and taken the same form, and would the trade-union movement have continued to suffer such a high loss in membership, organizational strength and morale? Conversely, even if there had been a miners' victory would not the Conservative government have returned to the fray at a latter stage, either in another outright confrontation or by overseeing a drip-by-drip reduction in pits and jobs that threatened the long-term survival of the mining industry on a rather more gradual but no less dramatic basis?

No doubt some people will dispute the validity of even the approach adopted here - with reference to the '84-5 miners' strike or any other historical event - on the basis that it is a pointless exercise; what happened in the past happened and no amount of alternative contemplation will change that or is worthwhile. But arguably the historical re-evaluation presented here of what was one of the most important British industrial disputes of the 20th century *has* demonstrated the methodological legitimacy and value of the exercise, not least because inquiring into what *might have happened* helps to provide a more comprehensive explanation of *what actually happened*.

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